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REMARKS

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Bureau of Intelligence and Research



Intelligence Brief

January 25, 1985

INDIA-SRI LANKA MARITIME CLASHES

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Recent maritime clashes in Palk bay and strait between India and Sri Lanka, involving fishing vessels and naval craft, cannot be ascribed to an ill-defined or poorly delimited maritime boundary. (Indians claim a Sri Lankan patrol boat was apprehended on the Indian side of the boundary; Sri Lanka denied that the craft violated Indian waters.) Aggressive patrolling by Sri Lanka of its 7,100 square kilometers of the bay and strait will undoubtedly lead to further clashes.

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The geography of Palk bay (see map) permits easy infiltration from Tamil Nadu via small, shallow-draft vessels, but restricts Sri Lankan naval patrols (especially during the southwest monsoon from April to June). Palk strait is 70 nautical miles (nm) long and 31 to 36 nm wide; Palk bay is about 35 nm across. Both are studded with sandy islands and bordered by low coastal plains. They separate India's Tamil Nadu province from the Tamil-speaking provinces of Sri Lanka.

International shipping detours to the east of Sri Lanka because the passage through the southern entrance to Palk bay from the Gulf of Manaar allows, at its deepest point, only a 9-foot draft. Adams Bridge, the area where the patrol boat was seized, is a narrow, submerged ridge of sand and islets stretching 18 miles between Pamban island (India) and Mannar island (Sri Lanka) with shallows of 6 feet.

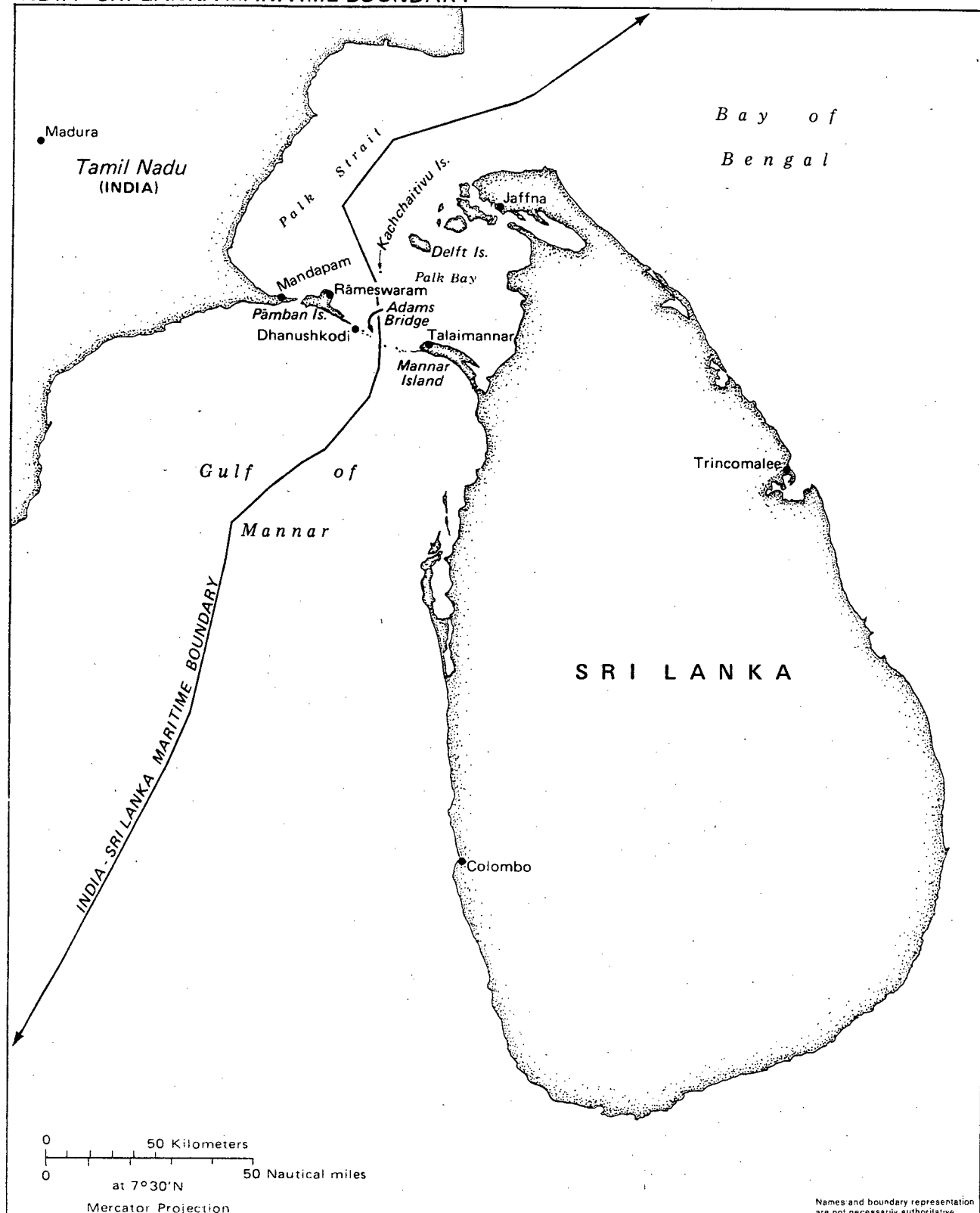
Palk bay was judged a historic bay by the Indian high court in Madras in a 1903-04 pearl-fisheries dispute, when both India and Sri Lanka were under UK administration. A 1974 maritime boundary agreement divided Palk bay and strait and also recognized Sri Lankan sovereignty over disputed Kachchativu island.

The remaining Indo-Sri Lankan maritime boundary in the Bay of Bengal and Gulf of Manaar, to the limits of the exclusive economic zone (EEZ), came into effect in 1976--one of the earliest EEZ agreements in Asia. In the same year, India, the Maldives, and Sri Lanka agreed to a trijunction point. Current bilateral tensions account for the fishery vessels' seizures; certainly, the limits of the respective fisheries jurisdictions are well defined.

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INDIA - SRI LANKA MARITIME BOUNDARY



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